

# Big Island gets visit from Lingle

Governor visits Waimea Elementary, talks DOE reform

By Travis Loop  
West Hawaii Today

Gov. Linda Lingle lowered her head to receive a unique lei during her visit to Waimea Elementary on Tuesday – a box of Band-Aids and other medical supplies dangled on a string as a reminder the school needs funding for a health aide.

Waimea Elementary is the only school on the island that does not have a permanent health aide, a position that would cost \$17,018 annually. The health aide from Waimea Middle currently visits the school to dispense medication and handle emergencies.

If my plan to put 90 percent of education funds under the control of the principal passes, situations like the health aide funding aren't a problem because Principal Don Merwin could make the decision to allocate money for that position," Lingle said.

Education reform is one of the predominant issues in Honolulu this session, and Lingle has been lobbying lawmakers to adopt her plan.

"If the legislature only does one thing with education reform, I want them to put 90 percent of the money in the principal's hands," Lingle said.

Lingle said that in conversations with teachers and administrators across the state, she has been told that change is possible if money was available to make decisions with.

"A cookie-cutter approach to distributing funding doesn't work, especially in places like the rural areas of the Big Island where there are different challenges," Lingle said.

Lingle is optimistic about the chances for educational reform this legislative session, despite the heated debate over the issue.

"But giving, say, 70 percent of the funding to principals would be fake reform, just covering existing personnel expenses and not allowing any flexibility," Lingle said. Principals currently only have control over 3 percent of non-personnel money. Creating local school boards and decentralizing the Department of Education is also a key element of Lingle's reform plan, an idea mired in controversy.

"I want the local school board issue on the ballot in November for the people to decide," Lingle said.

Critics of local school boards say the plan would add levels of bureaucracy, further stifling the educational system. According to Lingle's plan, however; the DOE would cease to exist in the current form, reducing layers of administration.

"I also stress the local school board issue to the legislature – they don't understand the depth of feeling on neighbor islands on having decisions about their children made elsewhere," Lingle said.

Those parents of students are under scrutiny themselves – poor parental involvement was one of the most frequently mentioned problems in the school audit reports ordered by the DOE.

"It seems there is nothing you can do directly to force parents to get involved, but you can have some influence by talking about it," Lingle said. She added that parents should possibly be required to attend meetings at the beginning of the school year to learn what is expected of their children in the way of academic standards and behavior.

Don Merwin, principal at Waimea Elementary, said the school has been working hard to reach out and involve parents. Students and parents attend family fun nights, where games involve academic standards. Brown bag lunches are also held so parents can picnic with their children on campus.

“Schools need to be creative like that to attract parents,” Lingle said.

With 47 schools statewide failing to make adequate yearly progress for four or more years, the pressure is on to find creative ways to solve various problems.

Some teachers and administrators claim the No Child Left Behind Act is unrealistic and underfunded, resulting in the schools falling short of standards. Nine states, including Utah and Virginia, have stopped using state funds to support NCLB due to various reasons, such as intrusion on local control and lack of federal funding.

“Everyone I know believes every child should achieve and that educators should be held accountable for that,” Lingle said. “So the fundamental parts of NCLB should absolutely not be lost, but maybe there could be some adaptations.”

Lingle’s visit to Waimea Elementary came at an unfortunate time – the school was closed because recent storms left the building without water. Administrators, faculty, staff and community leaders still met Lingle and toured the campus. The tour included stops in a tutoring area, a kindergarten classroom, special education areas and a third-grade classroom.

“It is so important to get out of the capitol, see what is happening around the state and talk to people directly,” Lingle said.

Recent tours of schools around Hawaii have led Lingle to consider the value of placing people without an educational background in administration positions.

“On top of the curriculum, there are so many crucial concerns with the facilities, operations and student behavior,” Lingle said. “And the pool of people is so small, we may have to start looking other places for leadership.”